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ABSTRACT

The document addresses communication problems between Anglo-American family planning counselors and Latin-American clients. Cultural differences in attitudes toward family, work, and sexuality are examined. The extended family provides the Latin-American woman with positive self-identity and serves as a source of social relations; it also favors and facilitates raising a large number of children. In contrast, family structure in the United States is characterized as nuclear; the woman is socially isolated if she remains solely in the role of housewife. Also, because of the absence of the extended family, the task of rearing children is the responsibility of the couple. Thus, work becomes a source of identity, influence, and social relations for the Anglo-American woman. On the other hand, labor laws in almost all Latin American countries make it easier for women to have and bring up children than does North American legislation. For example, obligatory day nurseries exist at locations which employ more than a minimum number of women. Finally, the greater difficulties in obtaining sex information as well as cultural obstacles, such as the Catholic church, increase the risk of unwanted pregnancies for Latin-American women. The easier access to relevant information and explicit discussion of sexual matters increase family planning alternatives for Anglo-American women. The conclusion is that the advantages of a radical limitation in the number of children are not clear cut in a Latin culture. Effective intercultural communication must be based on this knowledge. (Author/KC)

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BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN FAMILY PLANNING

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INTRODUCTION

Anglo-American and Latin-American women exhibit a different behavior in relation to the same Family Planning procedure.[1] When making a comparative analysis of both groups, it was found that the procedure is less productive in Latin-American countries.

Most sociological studies on behavior towards family planning, refer mainly to the relation between social class and contraceptive conduct. It has been proven that there is a direct ratio between a higher educational level and the incorporation of women in the labor market, and a higher effectiveness in family planning (Sullerot 1974; Jaquette 1973; Nash 1976). Without overlooking the relevancy of these investigations, the authors of the present paper intend to analyze distinctive intercultural elements which affect family planning behavior.

The incentive to develop this paper emerged from the results obtained in a study on the effectiveness of communication between Family Planning agencies and their clients in a rural community in California (Alcalay 1973).

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(1) Family Planning is the right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children, using the information, education and responsibility of the couples and individuals to exercise this right, taking into account the needs of their present and future children and their obligations to the community. (Bucarest 1973)

The majority of the clients (85%) were Latin women who had recently immigrated from Mexico, with little or no knowledge of English. The suppliers of clinical, as well as administrative services were Anglo-American women who, in some cases were bilingual and in others without any knowledge of Spanish.

The high number of abortions and unwanted births, and the low use of resources offered by the service, motivated the preparation of this study.

The aforementioned study discovered: 1) a vacuum, not only as regards the language, but also as regards the understanding of the values of the other party, which vacuum was present as a constant element in the exchange of dialogue and action between the providers and the clients of Family Planning; 2) that the contraceptive behavior of both groups was significantly different. Whereas a large percentage of Anglo-American women used natural contraceptive methods (diaphragm, condom and foam), almost all Latin women used clinical contraceptive methods (tablets and intrauterine device); 3) a distorted image with regard to the reasons inhibiting an effective approach to family planning. The suppliers mentioned machismo and Catholicism as cultural barriers to a more radical family planning by Latin-American women. However, the level of education, type of work, attitudes towards the family and work, were found much more significant factors to explain the different conduct in family planning. These differences emphasized the urgency of making

a more thorough comparative study of both cultures. Responding to this need, the authors of this paper set themselves the task of giving some thoughts to these differences, in the hope of contributing to a better understanding between both cultures.

This paper suggests that the distinct behaviors have their origin in sociocultural differences that prevail in the environment to which they belong. The object will be to comparatively analyze certain cultural elements which, in the judgment of the authors, may explain the different conduct in family planning.

To be sure, when speaking of Anglo-American women and Latin-American women as such, we cannot avoid overgeneralizing. In spite of this, we maintain that certain cultural traits are shared to some extent by the majority of the members of a society.

The features standing out because of their different emphasis in both cultures and which will be discussed below, are the attitudes towards the family, work and sexuality.

THE LATIN-AMERICAN AND THE ANGLO-AMERICAN WOMAN AND THE FAMILY

The Latin woman still tends to define herself in terms of her motherhood and her home. Although there are differences of class and education which do not permit peremptory categorizing, it is nevertheless a valid statement. One of the reasons why this is so, is the self-respect and personal valuation gained by the Latin women from this role which, within their culture, is regarded as something highly positive.

According to Jaquette (1973), Anglo-American sociologists, reared in a culture of Judeo-Protestant heritage which emphasizes patriarchal authority, excludes women from certain religious functions and sustains a masculine image of God, do not grasp the ambience of female power and influence in a society in which the Virgin is an important religi us figure. Most of the Latin-Americans are Catholics. The Virgin is the female image incorporated on a primary plane into the religious cult (in many regions the adoration of the Virgin is equal to or more important than the adoration of Christ).

The most important social unit is the extended family. By this is understood the family group composed of three generations, which may not live under the same roof, but which move necessarily in a community common to all members of the group. The extended family develops an affective interchange among its members, as well as relations with the outside which further define them as a family group.

The prevalence of the extended family, its clannishness, the relative lack of social mobility and the survival of the family as an important instrument of social regulation within a vast range of activities, grants the woman a considerable degree of power and influence.

It is generally the woman who is responsible for the religious and academic formation of the children, and it is she who provides legitimacy to the social sanctions of prestige, the selection of her children's mates, matters of heritage and acceptable conduct (Jaquette 1973). Furthermore, the family provides an ambience of positive identity for the woman. By positive identity is understood the respect and affection shown by family and society to the woman who belongs, and who follows the functioning rules of same. The family structured in this manner forms a nucleus of belonging, bestowing affection and support and is a source of gratifying activity, as well as a screen for wider social and communal rules.

Most of the interpersonal communications tend to develop within the context of the extended family, in which the prescribed standards of authority and deference in intergenerational relations are clearly delineated. Within the context of the family, each generation plays a necessary and important role in relation to the others.

Usually the parents, children en grandparents live in the same house, sometimes with single uncles or aunts, etc. This will determine the differences in the matter of attending to the children and of distributing the household chores, since these tasks can be shared by more than one adult.

Although the structure of the extended family may change due to the influence of internal migrations in the search for work, the exodus to the cities and industrial centers, the family remains as an important nucleus. Although geographical distances play a part, communication is strong, effective and the children are socially appreciated as a benefit, to the extent that the work away from home does not appear essential as a scurce of contact and esteem.

In Latin America, children represent the possibility of higher income, especially in rural areas, where they mean more hands to do the work or where the vision of a large family still has an economic value. Moreover, children represent an insurance against the old age of the parents (an economic factor). Summarizing, the family structure in Latin America provides a strong sense of identity and self-respect.

In the United States, in most cases the family consists of the couple and children of school age, or what has been called the nuclear family. This nuclear family generally lives dispersed in relation to the other members of the extended family, thus limiting family relations to a small number of individuals.

Internal migrations for questions of work, study, etc., favor the development of the small nuclear family, in which the woman is socially isolated if she remains solely in her role of housewife, and is limited to relations with a reduced number of persons. This factor has contributed to the decline of the family as a source of power and influence.

For many housewives, the lack of reward for a job well done, as well as social isolation, breed feelings of helplessness and despair, accompanied by depression and a deep loss of self-respect. (Tavris Offir 1977). When adding to this the dominant cultural values such as emphasis on personal gains, competitiveness, work outside the home, personal acquisitions in terms of money, status and power, the condition of housewife is devalued. In this category of women we often find the "housewife syndrome." This syndrome manifests itself in depression, loss of self-respect and sometimes a high incidence of somatic diseases. Bernard (1972) and other researchers believe that marriage exerts its most negative effects on women whose identity is seen as being only mothers and housewives.

The absence of the extended family concentrates the task of raising the children and the household chores on the couple. Furthermore, in the nuclear family, intergenerational communication remains limited to the parents and the children, excluding in most cases a stable communication with grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, etc.

THE ANGLO-AMERICAN AND THE LATIN-AMERICAN WOMAN AND WORK

The importance of work for the woman varies in both cultures. In the North American social context, the part played by work acquires greater dimensions as a source of satisfaction for the woman, than in the Latin-American social context.

Ferrer (1976), as a result of his study of housewives of the working class, states that work outside the home contributes to remedy the lack of contact, producing self-respect and a feeling of worth which seem to be absent in women who remain at home.

While further exploring those cases in which a housewife, although not working outside, feels she has a happy life, Ferrer found that happy housewives see their friends and family with regularity, whereas their husbands and relatives appreciate their work and give them moral support.

On the other hand, housewives who work outside, suffer the pressures of the double job, since her role at home does not change all that much. Contrary to popular belief, American husbands do not significantly share the responsibility of household work. (Vanek 1974). As a result, working wives have an average of ten hours less free time than other housewives and men who work. When the family grows because of more children, the share of the husband drops and that of the woman increases

by 5 to 10 per cent for each new child, whether she works outside or not. (Tavris and Offir 1977).

In the United States, the concept of work is a comprehensive one. There is a general consensus to give to the job most of one's intense energy and time, regardless of whether one is a man or a woman. Thus, the North American woman, a product of the nuclear family society, in the most favorable circumstances or as a "single mother," must choose between working in a highly competitive and demanding labor market or staying home to take care of the children. If she opts for staying home, the result will probably be financial austerity and a lack of self-respect and social contacts. If, on the other hand, she decides to take a job, it will sharpen her feeling of guilt provoked by the abandonment of her children, in addition to the double-heavy load of a demanding and tense job and her domestic and maternal duties. This feeling is intensified by the nonexistence of an extended family as a source of affection and care of the children.[1]

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[1] It is interesting to note the cultural segregation which makes of old people a caste apart, separated from intergenerational family life. North American values have been formed by the Calvinist mystique of profit and by an ideology which positively values the self-sufficient individual. These two beliefs exclude the aged from a useful active role, because they are no longer capable of gainful accomplishments and self-sufficiency. (Coelman and McCarthy 1974).

With regard to social support for the working woman, it can be said that it is not difficult for a pregnant woman to be afraid of losing her job. There is no social response which helps the mother in facilitating her pregnancy, her childbirth and the raising of her small children. It is interesting to note that medical insurance generally does not include parturition in its policies. At best, in those States where the woman is allowed to stay home from the job for some three weeks to give birth, such a permission is given without the benefit of salary.

In Latin America, the working woman and especially the pregnant woman is protected by law to a greater extent than her counterpart in the United States (Kinzer 1972). Since the twenties and thirties,Latin-American countries, with the exception of Bolivia, have very advanced legislation with respect to maternity; no woman can be fired from her job when she is pregnant; the woman enjoys a leave of absence with salary for a certain period of time before and after delivery (usually 12 weeks). There are also free medical services for mother and child. Finally, there are obligatory day-nurseries at locations where there are more than a certain minimum number of such women. It is therefore not surprising that the dilemma of the North American woman when facing motherhood or life at home and a professional life, is much more acute than that of the Latin-American woman.

The incorporation of women in the labor market in Latin America depends on the economic and social development of the country. Generally, the percentage of women incorporated in the labor force is not high (Pescateles 1976). Some of the factors associated with the women's share of the work force are: 1) generally, unmarried women have a higher rate of participation than married women, 2) among married women, those with small children are working in smaller numbers than those with older children, 3) the fact of belonging to an extended family leads to a higher rate of participation, which supports the idea of the importance of having somebody available to be entrusted with the care of the children and the home, 4) the level of education and professional training is directly related to the level of work participation. (Cobarrubias and Munoz 1978).

THE ANGLO-AMERICAN AND THE LATIN-AMERICAN WOMAN AND SEXUALITY

A comparison of the sexuality factor between both groups of women shows that to the Latin woman, the subject of sex presents more problems than to the Anglo-American woman. It is not customary to discuss sex at home; there is practically no sexual education at school level and sex is not broached between friends and family. This affects the relationship between the couple; communication between spouses on sexual topics is limited and in many cases nonexistent. The association between sexuality and guilt is more current in Latins than in Anglo-Americans. In this connection, Catholicism, based on the thoughts of St. Thomas of Aquino, justifies sexual intercourse only when its purpose is to procreate or at least when it is not planned to have no children. From this perspective, enjoyment of sex for its own sake appears as something sinful. The Catholic Church in Latin America has been influential in creating a sexually repressive climate.

The close relations between Church and State in most Latin-American countries have contributed to the absence of any treatment of sexual topics in the mass media such as radio, television and the press.

As regards the use of contraceptives, the Catholic Church has traditionally only approved of the "rhythm method," while considering all other methods as unnatural and thus contrary to the Catholic concept of marriage. This notwithstanding, in the

last 15 years most governments in Latin America have been promoting family-planning campaigns. The Catholic Church has not explicitly opposed these campaigns, insofar as they are kept within the boundary of health services and are not propagated by the mass media.. In other words, sexuality assumes a medical connotation without becoming a part of the general cultural ambience.

With regard to the North American woman, in the last ten years there has been a great change in this respect. With the massive diffusion of the Kinsey research data, and the ideas of Masters and Johnson in the seventies, the road was opened to a majority of women for a wider and more accurate knowledge about sexuality.

Moreover, signs have been pointing to a better handling of the subject at the family and school level. The mass media, such as television, magazines, newspapers, discuss sexual topics openly, and they are powerful transmitters of information in this respect. This encourages a dialogue between marriage partners and the possibility of sharing family planning.

Consequently, although the subject of sex continues to be conflicting in the Anglo-American, as well as in the Latin-American cultures, it can be concluded that the dissemination of sexual information in North American society reflects a higher degree of social acceptance of the subject.

CONCLUSIONS

It can be affirmed that the differences in both cultures significantly affect the definition of the family-planning concept in North America and Latin America. Great differences with regard to the family structure, the function of work and attitudes on sexuality in both cultures, act as intervening variables which must be incorporated in intercultural family-planning programs.

The extended family means generally a great deal to the Latin-American woman, in terms of belonging and identity. It provides her with a positive ambience of influence and social relations. The family in the United States is more and more defined as nuclear, and is being lost as an ambience of influence and a source of social relations.

The extended family favors and facilitates the raising of a larger number of children than the nuclear family.

Within this different family context, work is of a more centralized significance to the Anglo-American woman as a source of identity, influence and social relations. On the other hand, labor laws in almost all Latin-American countries make it easier for the woman to have and bring up children, than does North American legislation.

The greater difficulty in obtaining access to sex information, as well as cultural obstacles, increase the risk of unwanted pregnancies for Latin-American women. The easier access to relevant information and explicit discussion of sexual matters increase the alternatives for Anglo-American women with regard to family planning.

CONSEQUENTLY, the advantages of a radical limitation in the number of children are not and perhaps will never be as clear cut in a Latin culture.

Likewise, the concern of Anglo-American women resulting from the weakening of family ties and the drastic reduction in the number of children, should be related to the structural factors which produced this phenomenon.

Finally, an effective intercultural communication between the Anglo-American providers of family planning and Latin-American clients, can significantly benefit from the elimination of certain myths, and a better cultural understanding of and empathy for this task, which is of special urgency in the United States, considering the growing importance of the Latin population. Both cultures can and must improve their level of communication and their capacity of joint action and cooperation.

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